

Charlotte Reeve Conover

On Being Eighty

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.



ON BEING EIGHTY



AND OTHER DIGRESSIONS



By
CHARLOTTE REEVE CONOVER

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

We had never published a booklet before and never meant to publish this one, but the courage, humor and wisdom of this blind old lady were too contagious. We first published it against what we thought was our better judgment, but it has so captured the public fancy that it has gone through repeated editions.

All through her long life Mrs. Conover was an active and devoted citizen of Dayton, Ohio, and the following tribute by Anne O'Hare McCormick was written on the occasion of a civic gathering in her honor on May 19, 1931.

It is because she is a citizen of the world that Mrs. Conover is so valuable a citizen of Dayton. Her time is not yesterday but today and tomorrow; she has one of the youngest and most adventurous minds I know. Year after year, in her writings, her current events classes, her lectures, her casual talk, she has opened windows and widened horizons for thousands in this neighborhood. She has seen much, heard much, read much, thought much and whatever she has learned she has shared.

We have had great citizens, men and women distinguished in science, in industry, in politics, in business, in the development of beauty and the arts. Here is a citizen whom we honor because she has labored to keep the mind of Dayton alive. . . . Not size or wealth but civilization makes a city, and civilization is made by citizens like Charlotte Reeve Conover, who enlarge life by enlarging the orbit of the intellect and the spirit.

On Being Eighty

and

GROW OLD AND LIKE IT
SIGNPOSTS IN THE DARK
THE POOLS ARE FILLED WITH WATER



1941

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How it Came to be Written

EDITOR (*on telephone*):—Hello! I hear this is your birthday. Congratulations! I want a column and a half on how it feels to be eighty.

WRITER:—Sorry, but I haven't a minute's time. I have rented my house for the summer and am packing up to go to California.

EDITOR:—But you really must. It won't take long. Step on the gas!

WRITER:—Being a mere man, you don't understand. They are giving me a surprise party, and I am having a permanent wave.

EDITOR:—But this is business. The Sunday issue is being made up.

WRITER:—Then wait until you are eighty and write it yourself. That will be fine!

EDITOR:—Too long to wait for copy. Come now, hustle!

WRITER:—I have loaned my typewriter to a friend and can't get it back.

EDITOR:—I am sending out a portable from the office and a check at space rates. The messenger will wait for copy. That settled it.

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On Being Eighty

I HAVE always been bad at figures and now I wish I were worse. As the months have rolled around to a fateful anniversary I have been adding up the years from 1855 to 1935 and it always comes out one way. Try as I may to make it sixty-five or seventy, it remains eighty. It can't be denied or explained away. I, who used to think forty "old," now have to accept twice that figure!

The editor asks me how it feels to be eighty. I begin a long-drawn-out plaint and then, my conscience coming to the fore, am obliged to add "not so bad." To be sure, it is a sort of judgment day. My early prejudices, half-baked opinions, silly ideas rise up and smite me. I might as well make this a confessional and get a few things off my conscience.

In the first place, I have always despised—not old people—but the things old people do: forget words, not dictionary polysyllables but ordinary bread and butter words. They drop right out of a hole in my mind. I am sailing along with my accustomed oratorical fluency and suddenly I am brought to a halt like a little dog on a leash. Such a word as "opportunity" or "experience" or "rain-coat" daunts me, the most familiar English words that everybody keeps in his cupboard for daily use. But when I want them in a hurry they are not there. How that failing in others has aroused my scorn! But oh, dear Lord! Here too! Here too!

Then the nice old ladies that sit on porches and drop their scissors and ask the same questions over and over again, who lose their gloves, their glasses, and forget everything except dinner time. Here too! The old ladies who drop out of the conversation like a stitch in their knitting and when they come back, have lost the thread of the discourse. Here

too! The old ladies who make other people trouble, who have to be helped down steps and into cars, who don't know people until they are introduced the fourth time. Here too! Oh, how I have shuddered at such delinquencies in others and have vowed with the fervency of an acolyte: "Never will that time come to me."

I have accepted with philosophy the fact that with added years my faculties would diminish, sight and hearing would fail, and legs would wobble, but my judgment, my blessed judgment would, I was sure, remain unimpaired. And then, having gone down town for a spool of black thread, to bring home a white one because my delinquent mind told me at the time it "might do"; to go down town and purchase an alleged work of art which would not be tolerated this side of the garage or the trash barrel.

It is such slips of judgment that convey to my mind the suspicion that I have joined the ranks of the decrepit, that the calendar tells the truth and that my best line is to accept it and find out what there is in the inevitable march of time to give comfort and satisfaction. What can we get out of life when so much of it is behind us?

What, in short, are the compensations of old age? Or are there any? When the grasshopper becomes a burden and tired muscles refuse to obey orders from headquarters, is there anything left?

With all my heart and soul I answer "yes." First, to take the place of our former activity, physical and mental, there is an armchair participation in the affairs of the city and world which, while it does the city and the world not much practical good, keeps our own mental machinery in order and prevents us from falling into a fatal inferiority complex. For instance the daily paper, bringing us the incomparable panorama of the world's progress, will still delight us and make us just as mad as it did when we were thirty. The working out of what may be called God's purpose in the world is

going on all the time and may fill us with joy as we follow it, in spite of the occasional setbacks that the devil interposes.

How can one resent rheumatic pains as long as the medical profession is daily working out healing for poor humanity? Or when archaeologists with their spades are uncovering forgotten civilizations? The all-absorbing, soul-compelling interest of these things is in actuality that phrase of the Lord's Prayer which reads, "Thy Kingdom come." It is always with us and can always be depended upon to keep us young. Life ought to become more and more interesting with the years and, believe an humble octogenarian, it does.

The moon still shines through the trees and makes the same pattern on the pavement. The Fifth Symphony comes over the radio when you turn the button. The robin trills in a tree-top. Anno Domini is nothing to him! And through the enjoyment of these perennial blessings comes the strangely comforting thought that the glorious things of life are not passing but permanent, that with our fading the blessings of human existence are always here to lend their lustre.

I know that in asking for this screed the editor expects me to be didactic. For what other end does one reach eighty except to tell younger people what they ought to do? It's not much in my line, but I'll do my best. To cultivate imagination would help. Imagination, the gift of the gods to poor literalist mortals! The faculty of seeing beyond the present and the actual into the future and the immaterial, the putting oneself into the other person's place, the visualizing of other people's difficulties in order to give not perfunctory, but living, vital sympathy.

Then there is appreciation. We are so apt to seize on the unimportant instead of the really admirable, when we are callow and young. We turn from revealing, illuminating, educating things of life to the evanescent and shallow, the silverplated show-window occupations and interests, and

then when we are old say that life isn't interesting any longer and we wish it were over.

There is memory, the recalling of past years and past experiences; how it brings laughter to the lips and tears to the eyes! From the ridge-pole of life one sees so much farther than from the eaves. Life is seen as a whole instead of piecemeal. Our little foolish strivings, our half-way ambitions, our childish estimates sink into the proper perspective. We are content to welcome each day as a gift and are grateful for what it gives.

The disconcerting fact is that to prepare for old age one should begin in youth. And in youth one is sure that old age "will never come." It is so far off, so unthinkable. But the zest for living need not be permanently absent because it concerns itself with the impalpable, the immaterial things of life. One may be too old to jump on the running board of a car, but the honeysuckle still smells as entrancingly as it did when we were eighteen.

Cultivate appreciation and imagination. Is there anything else to comfort the advancing years? I have kept out the most important until the last. Better than all these, and beyond our control except to thank God for it, is the lovely and utterly indescribable gift of the consideration from friends. Who can measure it or describe it? They are so forgiving, so generous, so understanding, so beautifully helpful. If, when sight goes and hearing is dulled and we are cut off from the things we have always loved to do, friends remain, the best of life is still granted to us. Let us remember the old hymn, "Nun danket alle Gott"—"Now thank we all our God."



Originally written for the *Dayton News*

June 14, 1935

Grow Old and Like It

I HAVE been invited to accept a professorship (not an assistantship, but the real thing, "a chair," in short) in a new university to be devoted to the education and enrichment of those over sixty.

I am considered amply qualified for the position, having reached not only the psalmist's limit of three-score-years-and-ten, but the point where I can firmly but respectfully contradict David when he adds, "though men be so strong that they come to four score, yet is their strength but labor and sorrow." Given a good digestion, a bridle-wise nervous system, the proper choice of ancestors and either a job or a hobby, and I maintain that four score may be reached, not only without "labor or sorrow" but with actual and positive enjoyment.

It cannot be denied that there is, if not as yet a widespread demand, at least a great need for a college for grandparents. All the emphasis, all the public funds are devoted to the education of the youth of our land, but where are the universities and technical schools for students of sixty up? We are just ignored. These foolish little creatures in the freshman and sophomore years don't need so much attention. They are taking in knowledge through every pore of their skins. Learning comes to them like breathing; no one learns faster except a two-year-old baby.

But for us oldsters, whose muscles are stiff and minds hardened as our arteries, who have to be shoved and prodded into new ideas, there is nothing at all done. For instance, if you are thirsting for information on how to find the area of a circle there will be an army of professional mathematicians to rush to your assistance; but if you need training on how to recognize a person the third time you are introduced to him, where is the institution to matriculate you? This lack we hope in time to supply.

Since the undertaking is somewhat novel it will be well to outline our plans in order to insure a large enrollment at the next semester.

The entrance lobby, so to speak, of our curriculum will be a department called Acquiescence, or Resignation. The premise to all real education is frank acceptance of the situation—fact-facing. Old age is a fact, not a theory. It cannot be gotten away from or covered up with lipstick or a belated skittishness. Anna Steese Richardson in a recent article gives good practical advice to the old on how to live comfortably, and adds: "I love life at seventy." I can go her a decade better, for I love life at eighty, and am prepared to share it with our future student body.

Of course to do it right one should begin to train at twenty but our college does not operate retroactively. It is designed to fit the necessities of those who, having lived casually and unthinkingly during half a century, suddenly bump into their sixtieth birthday and recoil from it with incredulous horror.

I will outline briefly the plan of the curriculum and list the various advantages it offers. It consists of two main divisions—one of Learning, the other of Un-learning. Special attention is called to the latter, in which consists the great advantage of the new over the old in education. Having put on one's shoes, brushed one's hair, and read the morning paper in a certain regimented procedure for sixty years, it follows (according to psychological law as elucidated by William James in his chapter on "Habit") that the mind follows the same rut of procedure and becomes rigid and unable to accept or utilize new ideas and principles.

Here we find the great obstacle to progress in the world. If a man has voted one party ticket, subscribed to his denominational church paper, and held firmly to rugged individualism or state's rights until he has grandchildren, he is, though he does not know it, a public menace. He should

be rudely joggled out of his antiquated hallucinations and forced to open the shutter of his mind to let in new light. For this purpose we have a staff of football athletes in assistant professorships, whom we find admirably adapted to this rôle.

Students for this department are recruited from the ranks of those who, having made up their minds on a certain question in 1870, still hold to it in 1938 regardless of the changes between those years.

I have in mind a lovable septuagenarian who viewed with distaste and antagonism the idle talk and silly newspaper gossip about the so-called science of aviation. In his youth, at school entertainments, he had recited to much applause "Darius Green and His Flying Machine," which seemed to him and his audiences not only the height of wit but the last word on the subject of man's ability to fly.

When it appeared that a couple of fools named Wright were seriously experimenting with the idea, he was exasperated beyond expression. He had declared many times at the top of his voice that man could never overcome gravity and this in time was amplified into the belief that if he could he shouldn't be allowed to. So he resisted all information and since our department of Un-learning had not been perfected he remained in ignorance of the progress of science.

At last came the announcement that the Wrights were to fly an airplane over the city of Dayton. Outraged at such an invasion of his cherished opinions and the overthrow of a life-time of settled convictions, he not only retired into the house at the hour when his townspeople were assembled in the streets, but put his fingers into his ears to shut out the sound of the motor.

Our department of Acceptance and Resignation will be supplemented by intensive lectures on Gratitude. These lectures will inculcate constant recognition of the debt we owe at seventy to doctors and dentists, to dressmakers and tailors,

to oculists and opticians, to operators of beauty parlors, masseurs and physical culture cults. What would become of us without their beneficent ministrations? Imagine a glittering dowager at a ball, or an eminent senator giving forth oratorical flights in the halls of Congress, suddenly—on the spot—robbed of the effects of these public benefactors? The mere suggestion is horrific.

Therefore our students will never be allowed to forget just how and why they are, at an advanced age, enjoying a prolonged and comfortable existence. The lectures will be illustrated with pictures of their great-grandmothers in stiff unbecoming clothes and unmanicured hands; of their great-grandfathers reduced, in the prime of the middle years of life, to a bread-and-milk dotage because the dentists had not then learned to supply what was needed. And, by the way, it is a matter of regret that dentists get so little recognition for their work in comparison to doctors. With what zest and detail do we exchange data with our friends on our various surgical experiences! But how seldom we call public attention to our new fictitious molars!

I had an aunt once, an estimable woman. I would not have you think me insensible to her high moral attributes, but she took out her teeth at night and put them in a bowl! What fastidious youngster of fourteen could be expected to stand that? My passionate reaction to the procedure was to declare that when one reached the senility of forty-five or fifty one should not only be resigned to die but welcome the release.

Came a time in the course of years when, arrived at that fateful era, I came home from the dentist's after "total extraction" to apply my adolescent convictions. Bracing myself with the kind of courage that I infer is required in an African safari, I marched boldly to a mirror, turned on the electric light and confronted my depleted features. It was pretty bad.

But my self examination must lack nothing. So I asked myself the candid question: "Do I want to be gathered to my ancestors? Am I willing to be translated to realms of glory just because I have come to dentist plates?" With a distorted but perfectly truthful laugh I answered myself in slang that would have shocked my grandchildren: "Not on your life! I want to stay here and have a good time for at least twenty years or more." I have stayed thirty years and am still going up. It is by such means that our student body will grow in grace and resignation with the galloping years and learn how many things besides teeth they can give up smilingly.

Akin to the department of Resignation is the department of Bluff: Elementary Bluff and Advanced Bluff. Both are concomitants of the art of un-learning. They represent the efforts of mind and body to lay aside old habits and take on new without the public being conscious of it. The hardest lesson for our students to unlearn will be that of locomotion. I can hear, though half a century has passed, my mother's admonition when setting me at any chore! "Now, my dear, be brisk!" She was an energetic person and much concerned over my dilatoriness. Being (so I tell my grandchildren) a dutiful and obedient child, I cultivated the habit of moving quickly.

But dare I obey her principles at this stage of the calendar and be "brisk"? Nay—for if I do I break china, fall over my own feet, and create havoc all over the premises. All the bruised shins and broken bones in antediluvian frameworks come from moving too quickly. Therefore most of our students, I feel, will major in Deliberation. They will save bones and money in discovering that the proper rate of progression for eighty is a ponderous carriage in *rallentando tempo*, holding on casually to any article of masculine furniture in the vicinity.

My colleagues and I, in the preparation of our course of study, have been surprised that so many of the detailed instructions to our classes must be in the negative. This shows that children at both ends of the life-span need an abundance of "Don'ts." If, for instance, you run against a table which is out of the field of your focus, don't look embarrassed and allow those little wrinkles to gather between your eyes, which the "beautician" so warns you against. Just assume a bland, gratified expression as if that was just what you were trying to do.

If the general conversation gets blurred and you feel yourself lost, don't cup your ears and say "Hey?" That's gone out. Turn on a nonchalant smile, as near as you can make it, and keep it going until a chance word uttered the way the wind blows gets you back into the current of talk.

Don't omit to put down on your calendar every appointment when you make it or some day you will wake up to the realization that you have promised an interview with a group of school-girls inquiring about the League of Nations, the chief of police with data on crime necessary to your next club paper and a committee on Cultural Relations with Mongolia, all at the self-same identical hour. To disentangle oneself from an impasse like that requires more finesse and diplomacy than a septuagenarian is apt to possess.

Don't contradict your grandchildren. They know better than you and you might as well get used to it. Even if you are right and they wrong, they will have such sweet, unflinching self-assurance that you might as well argue with a turbine water-wheel for all the satisfaction you get. Whether the subject under discussion be automobile accessories or transcendentalism, they will have so many irrefutable arguments to hurl at you that you will get all bogged up in your mind and wish you had stayed out of the discussion.

Don't spot your clothes, or, if you must, take care to be looked over by a member of the family before you emerge into polite society, to see if you have tomato puree on your lace jabot or French dressing where it was never intended to be used.

Don't be too sure that the lady you are talking to is the one you think she is because she wears a green dress. Someone else may own a green dress and then calamity will overtake you.

Don't inquire after absent husbands or wives until you have ascertained whether they have been divorced. To forget this small rule may invite black humiliation.

Don't shake hands with a stranger in church, say you are glad to see her and hope she will come again. She may have been a member twenty years before you were.

Don't tell a story until you have combed your memory for the times you have told it before. The set expression and fishy eye of your listeners will reveal your faux pas and you will have to cover it up by changing the subject. You can't expect everybody to be as kind and helpful as your own family who pretend to ring a bell and say, "Ting-a-ling, Grandma, you have told that story six times."

This necessarily inadequate outline will suffice to indicate the general plan of our new institution of learning. The name over the lintel will read, "The Old Age Educational and Renovating Plan, Inc." A large enrollment is anticipated.



Signposts in the Dark

ONE SUMMER DAY not long ago I was introduced tumultuously into a new, strange, bewildering world. In it I found myself reduced to the status of a scared four-year-old child, where I got lost in the geography of my own home and where blundering finger tips had to show me what to do. Nothing was as it used to be. All the manual dexterity gained through a long life went for naught. The agency which produced this cataclysm was a microscopic hemorrhage of the eyeball.

Being blind at eighty is very different from being blind at eight. Youth adapts itself to almost anything, but age has to contend with the imperious domination of hardened arteries and solidified habits.

I hear of people, blind from birth, reading Braille; going about city streets unaided except by a cane or a dog on a leash; behaving at the dinner table with their accustomed fastidiousness; gaining a Ph.D. degree by having the research material read aloud to them. Before such triumphant accomplishments I stand afar off, prostrate myself in humility, and touch my head to the floor. I am not in that class and I know it. I once expressed astonishment at the dexterity of a blind finger and thumb which selected a tiny phonograph needle and fitted it into its place. "Oh, my dear," said the sightless owner, "they have had forty-eight years' experience."

The New World presents problems both severe and ludicrous. The first one is being a trouble to other people, and the second being impolite. From the moment you leave your front door, descend the steps, and bump your head on the lintel of the taxicab, until you are taken to your place in the home of a friend, you are making trouble for other people. Your progress will be marked by the debris of mistakes.

A cordial smile from a friend across the room you will meet with a cold stare, because, of course, you have not seen

her face. You will ignore entirely a pleasant remark from your neighbor on the left at a dinner table while you utter a correspondingly pleasant remark to the back of the head of the person on your right who is conversing with a friend farther on. You will greet effusively a newcomer whom you have greeted effusively ten minutes earlier, and don't like much anyway. One way of meeting the situation might be to assume a fixed forced smile such as is worn by elderly overtired hostesses, an aspect once described by Harvard students as the "dry grin." The trouble with this Cheshire cat technique is that it is apt to fall on the just and unjust alike: upon the hostess whom you are thanking for a pleasant evening, or upon the waiter who is passing you the salted almonds.

An introduction is a pit in which many a blind person has been wrecked. For instance, a gentleman mentions your name as preceding a presentation to his lately acquired third wife (the other two having vanished through the divorce court). You see neither him nor his arm in the gesture toward his wife, but obedient to the social instinct, you bow politely in the wrong direction to tell the wrong lady how much you have looked forward to meeting her. This results in a disagreeable reaction on the part of the new husband who is, naturally, touchy on the subject of wives.

You are in a bank, holding on to the arm of your companion and moving slowly with the others in the line up to the cashier's window. After you have transacted your business, not knowing the line of customers has changed its position you turn and slip your hand confidently under the elbow of a perfectly strange gentleman who apologizes and backs away. I once politely excused myself to a side of beef which I had inadvertently jostled as it hung in a crowded market.

You set yourself at a social luncheon, surrounded by friends you have known for years—gay, sympathetic, cul-

tivated and tactful. Here, if ever, is the place you ought to shine. But do you? Can you? Remember that to your present capacity the place is not a well-lighted dining room, but a dark cave at the farther end of which there seem to be a dozen people all laughing and talking at once. You cannot hear what they say. You cannot toss the ball of conversation because you don't know from which direction it comes or where it leads. By the time your sluggish wits have evolved a sustaining share in the subject under discussion it has been dropped and something else substituted. You are a wet blanket at a friend's table.

Even more dismaying than this is to be a guest at a public dinner. I have noted with discomfiture that the worse my table manners become the more I am urged to sit at the speaker's table. It seems rude to decline, so on one occasion—a dinner to a visiting bishop—I was led to a seat right opposite the dignitary. A waiter in the secret brought me a plate with the turkey cut into small pieces. At least that was his idea. Some morsels, however, were not completely severed, but I went bravely to work with an unseeing fork and an unfeeling biscuit to use as a pusher. The mashed potatoes were not so difficult; the cranberry sauce I was wise enough not to tackle. But I was hungry and did want some turkey, so after carrying an empty fork to my lips four or five times I at last felt that I had successfully speared a piece of turkey breast. I had, but unfortunately it was attached to another piece by a segment of skin, which piece dangled down over my chin like an upholsterer's ornamental tassel, in fine view of the bishop and all the guests. And he was a high churchman at that.

If at a dinner I have progressed through soup to coffee without a mistake, if I have not tipped over my glass of water, if I have kept the handle of my fork out of the gravy—in short, if I have behaved like a normal, well conducted person—my satisfaction is boundless, but inaudible. No one

knows how very clever I have been. There are no huzzas of acclamation. I have to do my own applauding.

Doing without eyesight discloses some astonishing and unexpected results which might be called by-products. One of these is defective hearing. Fleeing to my medical adviser, my terrified appeal, "Am I going to be deaf as well as blind?" brought the response, "Your ears are in perfect condition. You don't hear a speaker because you don't see his face." This reveals what a lot of unconscious lip reading the best of us do.

Another by-product is difficulty in keeping one's balance while walking. I was annoyed to discover that I, hitherto a responsible character, had acquired the gait of an inebriate. When I again asked for advice, it was explained to me that the seeing and hearing apparatus both have much to do with the motor system; that both deaf and blind people are apt to have trouble with insecure walking. I am glad to accept this professional verdict since it absolves me from unpleasant inference.

Forced inaction is another by-product. If it has been your habit of life to put, as Kipling says, sixty minutes of work into every hour, the rôle of sitting idly, hands in lap, waiting for the hours and half-hours to strike is well nigh unendurable. You cannot put on your hat and take a brisk walk. You cannot go out into the garden where you will mistake flower beds for paths. You cannot play a game of solitaire, write a note to a friend, verify a date on a calendar, file your finger nails or read the morning paper. Being chained hand and foot to a rocking chair like a barnacle on a ship's bottom is likely to lead to a psychiatric ward. If the metaphors are mixed, it only serves to exemplify further the confusion of mind at this new experience.

Perhaps the most serious of these by-products is the lack of privacy. From your underwear to your check book, everything is open to the world. Every letter to a dear and inti-

mate friend has to go through the medium of a third person. One may not have any guilty secrets to conceal, but there are some affairs one likes to keep private. You prefer not to have even a member of your own family know you have overdrawn your bank account.

Another unexpected result of the disappearance of vision is a peculiar kind of nervousness familiar, perhaps, to people of a timid temperament, but undreamed of by me. My reaction to small, unimportant stimuli like running into an innocent chair or dropping a book, resembles what has been described as the "going off" of an alarm clock in the pit of the stomach—a terrifying inner cataclysm caused by the silliest little occurrences that would be unnoticed if the eyes were on the defensive frontier.

A most serious challenge came the first time I spoke publicly after the loss of my eyes. I did not want to advertise my affliction either by being led by the hand to my place on the stage as if I were five years old, or entering leaning on a cane as if I were ninety-five. I wanted to keep the points of the compass in my mind and not bow sweetly to the wings or to the back-drop and say, "Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen." The very kind master of ceremonies suggested that we both take our places in advance before the stage curtains were drawn. This we did, he keeping within reach of my right hand. When the squeak of the curtain rings told me the time had come I knew I was in the glare of the foot-lights in full view, while ahead of me in what seemed to be a black, formless void was the audience.

A speaker always depends for his best inspiration on the responsive expression in the eyes of his hearers. This, of course, was denied me. Was I going to flunk, make a fool of myself? At the first audible ripple, which passes like wind over a wheat field, I knew the people were there, expectant, friendly and interested, and my confident personality came back.

The experience of being catapulted as I was into the Kingdom of the Sudden Blind late in life brought with it not the gentle resignation of a Christian martyr, but the proud defiance of a thwarted human soul. A new job was to be learned at my time of life. Very well! I would accept it, and I would do it better than anybody else ever had done. I would not sit like a blind mendicant on a street corner, extending a tin cup to receive the pitying nickels from my friends. I would not grope and paw. I would not clutch and stumble. I would meet life with my chin up and nobody should know that I was different from normal people.

This requires the understanding of a sympathetic family. It means the reeducation and reorganization of all. For myself, I had had on that side of the question years of intensive training, for my mother was blind and the family learned its lessons. We never left a door half open for her to run into. We never laid anything on top of her personal possessions to confuse her groping fingers. We never set anything down in the middle of the floor or left a chair out of place. "Gangway for Mother" became the family rule.

In my New World I soon found necessary a rigid interpretation of "a place for everything and everything in its place." Every garment must have its invariable hook or its place and not be left elsewhere. I learned that the only enduring existence for a blind person is to do for one's self. Learning to dress in the morning is as unmistakably a moral duty as keeping the Ten Commandments. Who in a busy household, with the father leaving for his office and the children getting ready for school, can be called upon by a plaintive voice saying, "Will somebody please find my comb and brush for me?"

In the pursuit of this endeavor there develops the depraved capacity of inanimate things for getting themselves mixed up, like buttons that elude buttonholes, left sleeves which substitute themselves for right, or small necessary

belongings which roll out of reach. Here the demon of anger must be met and conquered, for anger is corrosive. If a Sunday School superintendent of irreproachable probity fails to tie his necktie after seven attempts he will want to say "Damn!" and not under his breath either.

The truth is, the New World presents a series of challenges—challenges large and small—which must be grasped like a nettle. Life offers no opportunities to the dead. If the challenge comes and you meet it, you are not dead, although if you have lost your sight, you may sometimes suspect that you are.

Modern science has transformed the prison in which the blind live—the radio, bringing the Metropolitan Grand Opera to one's fireside; the Talking Book, sent with the compliments of the Library of Congress. Both will shorten the days.

With these challenges come certain satisfactions. Some of them are concerned with small personal achievements. Successfully manipulating a safety pin, a door key, a belt buckle, or distinguishing fabrics with the finger tips will bring to you the small glow of triumph. What you hear and what your sense of smell brings to you of the outside world, will reveal glories undreamed of in the past. Waking early in the morning, the smell of the spring earth is wafted in at the window. That and the trill of a robin will bring a *Sursum Corda*. If, in addition, you have reasonable health and are surrounded by helpful, loving friends, then the *Doxology*.

When the mind has learned to register automatically its gratifications instead of its irritations and disappointments, then you have turned the corner; you are out of the kindergarten class. You have gone up step by step with each challenge. Each challenge is a hope, and hope means growth, and growth brings freedom of the soul. And here it may not be irrelevant to remember the promises made long ago to "him that overcometh."

October, 1936

The Pools are Filled With Water

ALL THROUGH a long life, I have sat in my pew in church waiting patiently each Sunday for a sermon on a certain favorite text of mine. It has never come. Possibly because none of the ministry have ever seen fit to ask my advice on what to preach about. That I confide my wishes on the subject may seem like rushing in where angels fear to tread.

I do not even know whether the text in question is in the Bible. The concordance gives no help. I can only plead in defense of my position that I have sometimes heard sermons, which did not hurt anybody, based on texts that were not in the Bible—perhaps from Pilgrim's Progress or Thomas á Kempis. What a congregation wants from a sermon is, as I take it, some practical help for the week that lies ahead and not a sermon based on the higher criticism or on public events. This passage has come to my mind often about two o'clock in the morning, when the city streets are quiet, after the motorcycles have done their worst and before the milk wagons have begun. It is a glorious period in the twenty-four hours for the soul to find itself. The passage, winging its way out of the obscure into my mind, reads thus: "These are they who, going through this vale of misery, use it as a well. And the pools are filled with water." Whether this be from the Bible or no, it belongs to imagery from the Far East which sometimes carries much sublimity of thought. I have never been in the Orient but reading and pictures have told me that the word "well" means, not always, as with us, a deep excavation in the ground, but sometimes a flowing spring gushing out through layers of rock and finding its way past numerous depressions to lower levels. These depressions are little basins which, even when the drouth has diminished the supply of water, still hold re-

freshment for the thirsty. Is there not a parallel between a well and life?

Some may object to life being called a Vale of Misery. Of course, the objectors would be young and glowing with the intensity of living. Therefore, I have hoped that if I ever hear this sermon, it will not be preached by a young, successful, high-salaried preacher—a man who fills a big church and is quoted in the papers. The minister for my text must be a minister who has seen many years, is tired, and perhaps has not too good health and is not too successful, a minister who in this Vale of Misery called Life searches for comfort for himself and other tired souls he may be preaching to. We are told to capitalize our experiences for the benefit of literature and religious faiths. Then why not capitalize experience in all its aspects—success or non-success, health or sickness, happiness or discouragement? What could so well fit this suggestion as to go through life not aiming at triumphant business deals, a place in the lime-light and much public applause, but for small unconsidered advantages and for the strength to meet misfortune and to enjoy small benefits? Sometimes a human life may present on the surface all the glittering elements of what is called success, while deeper down it is in reality “A Vale of Misery.” One may have achieved great professional recognition, a large bank account and numerous friends, but if a son has gone wrong or a daughter been a disappointment, if the achievement of a certain end, dear to the inner soul, has been frustrated, is not life A Vale of Misery?

The message then of this unknown poet or prophet is, that there are people who have to endure and struggle on over life's arid waste, but who still have learned to clutch at small dribblets of happiness and use them to sustain their souls. What are some of these pools that are “filled with water”? At random, I list a few:

A shut-in stands at her window, a summer rain falling, a small branch of a maple tree, hardly more than a twig, stretching across the vision. The rain falls on a small maple leaf, wets its surface and reflects a little of the light of the sky. Passing over the surface of the leaf, it forms a little drop on the edge and drips slowly onto a leaf below, where the process is repeated. In at the window come fragrant summer smells, the mingled moist earth, wet foliage and budding beads of a wild grape vine.

A crowded market filled with people you do not know, do not care for, and are not interested in; too many of such in the world, you think. Suddenly, a rather drab woman at a market stall speaks your name. You have no recollection of her, but years ago something you said or wrote helped her and she says so with gratitude. You go on and the day is filled with a certain glow.

The dial of the radio brings you the Ninth Symphony. You listen to the end. It is not the music alone, glorious as it is, that fills the Pools with Water, but the fact that when Beethoven composed that symphony, he was blind, deaf and suffering from an incurable disease. From his grave, he reaches out to tell people that bodily suffering and limitations can be crowded down, trampled upon, and life carried on.

You are tired, discouraged, and personally inadequate. A kind, resonant, masculine voice asks with a warm hand-clasp, "Can I help you?", and the Pools are filled with Water.

Another voice comes, this time a soft Negro voice. All it says is, "Yes'm, I'm coming," but its tone carries the comfort of friendly faithfulness, the assurance that something needed is to be brought or done. And this Pool is filled with Water.

The silence of the night is disturbed by a rising wind which intensifies until it brings with it a much need rain-storm. There is a blinding flash, a crack of thunder explodes

and booms in vanishing rhythm across the sky. It sounds like a voice of power, and hope and strength. "You are small, helpless, inadequate, but you have work to do. Whatever it is, pick up your burden and carry on." Note: to those who are afraid of a thunder storm, this Pool is not filled with Water."

A kind friend takes you for a drive in the country. You pass from the noisy artery of crowded traffic and honking horns into a side road and put on the brakes under a large tree. The sun, low in the West, with its fanlike rays touches with pink the great masses of white cottony clouds which pile up in the heavens. The crickets among the weeds punctuate the silence with their cheerful chirping. The earthy smell from the fields brings rapture. Here are time and quiet to think over the actual, practical situation in one's life. True, age has brought crippling limitations. Eyes no longer conquer the printed page. Ears have reduced pleasant conversation of friends to a mysterious blur. You forget what was said to you day before yesterday. A sense of incompleteness and futility fills your soul. In addition to all this, the thermometer has mounted into the nineties and your bank account has dropped to the twenties. Are you to accept this in the attitude of the St. Gauden's statue in Rock Creek cemetery? Are you to echo the cry from Ecclesiastes, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, saith the preacher"? Listen! the answer comes on the air. It is not a trumpet call to victory. It is not a mighty chorus with songs of praise. It is not even the divine trilling of the nightingale. It is the call of a quail to his mate in the wheat field. One of the small comforting sounds of quiet and peace, of the casual and the commonplace. He is accredited with whistling, "Bob White! Bob White! Bob White!" But translated into the language of the eternal verities, what he really does say is, "Lift up your hearts! God's in His heaven, and the Pools are filled with Water."

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